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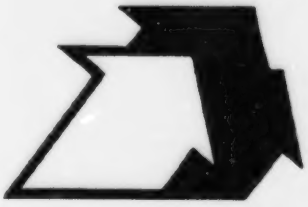
Monitoring School Attendance in Saskatchewan Schools

Case Study of an Inner City School
Pleasant Hill Community School
Saskatoon
Conducted for Saskatchewan Education



Saskatchewan Educational Leadership Unit
Department of Educational Administration
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, SK

May 1999

Pleasant Hill Case Study
January – May, 1999
Staff Response/Narrative

This case study is one component of a comprehensive study of school attendance in Saskatchewan. While the larger study is designed to provide quantitative data regarding student attendance and movement in the province, this case study will provide insight into the day-to-day lived experience in an inner city school. Your response to the following questions will be invaluable in determining that "lived experience".

Please respond to the following, in brief narrative form, to the degree that you consider appropriate. Your response is much appreciated and will be kept anonymous. Your name will be used only as a means of identifying you for further comment or verification.

1. How would you describe teaching/working at Pleasant Hill?
2. How serious is the phenomenon of student movement (enrolment and withdrawal) in your work and how do you cope with it?
3. In your opinion, what are the main reasons for student movement?
4. What steps might be taken/are being taken to improve attendance and to prevent withdrawal?
5. What trends (positive or negative) do you see developing at Pleasant Hill?

Thanks for your assistance. Please leave your response in the envelope in the office by March 15.

RESPONSE

Name _____ Position _____

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In conclusion, I wish to acknowledge the contribution of Dave Hawley, Associate Director, Saskatchewan Educational Leadership Unit, for his guidance and supervision and Fran Roberts, secretary, for her work in preparing the data collection instruments and this report.

To all, a heartfelt thank you.

A. Schell
Researcher

REQUEST FOR PUBLICATIONS

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Criteria for Selecting Inner City Elementary Schools:

A school should be considered for the Inner City Elementary Schools Program if the school attendance area meets six or more of the following criteria:

1. The unemployment rate is 25 percent above the city average.

2. The proportion of single parent families is 25 percent above the city average.

3. The proportion of those whose first language is not English is 25 percent above the city average.

4. The proportion of parents with less than Grade 9 education is 25 percent above the city average.

5. The proportion of families below the poverty line ($20,000.00) is 25 percent above the city average.

6. The proportion of students of aboriginal ancestry is at least 25 percent of the school enrollment.

7. The proportion of low cost houses and rental property is 25 percent above the city average.

8. The proportion of family problems such as hunger and abuse, is 25 percent above the city average.

Source: Saskatoon Board of Education. (1989). Concept Plan for Inner City Elementary Schools. Saskatoon SK

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Although there is general agreement among educators, parents and community groups that student mobility is a serious problem and that it represents a major threat to quality education, there is no effective mechanism to monitor student movement and attendance in provincial schools at the present time. As a result, it is impossible to determine the effect of mobility on student progress and school system effectiveness. While tracking student movement through and among school systems is, generally, difficult, it is particularly difficult when dealing with aboriginal students since self-identification is optional and many jurisdictional issues exist.

Since it is difficult to assess the effectiveness and improve the "holding power" of the publicly-funded school system without accurate data regarding student attendance, movement and achievement a study was designed by the Saskatchewan Educational Leadership Unit (SELU) to provide both quantitative and qualitative data related to these topics. The quantitative component, titled Monitoring School Attendance in Saskatchewan Schools, was conducted between September 1997 and September 1998 to provide generalizable data regarding student movement in Saskatchewan by studying student mobility in a random sample of approximately 10% of provincial schools. In addition, a case study of an inner city elementary school, which was known to experience significant mobility, was conducted between January and May 1999 as a means of obtaining qualitative data. Pleasant Hill Community School in Saskatoon was selected since it is a "typical" inner city elementary school which was available for and open to activities associated with a case study. Its location in Saskatoon was also important as a means of minimizing costs. This report contains the results of that study.

Purpose

The purpose of the case study was to obtain first-hand information regarding the "lived experience" at Pleasant Hill Community School with particular emphasis upon the phenomenon of student mobility. Specific areas of interest included the following:

- Setting and Activity
- Perceptions, Opinions and Reactions of Participants
- Trends and Issues for consideration.

Since the study was not designed to evaluate school or individual functioning or to judge appropriateness of policies, practices and activities but rather to display the reality faced daily, no attempt was made to arrive at recommendations or suggest alternative functioning.

Conceptualization/Approach

The basis for activity was the case study methodology suggested by Merriam in Case Study Research in Education: A Qualitative Approach (1988). This approach emphasizes collaborative, evolutionary, multi-faceted investigative activity. Emphasis was placed upon qualitative/descriptive assessment rather than quantitative analysis. The focus throughout was the total school/school population.

While specific activity was evolutionary and collaborative (as per Merriam) a number of information sources were identified in advance. These predetermined sources included individuals and groups associated with Pleasant Hill, stored data and researcher observation during site visits.

Triangulation of data from these various sources was employed to ensure that a valid representation of the reality was obtained. All sources were important as contributors of both facts and "shades of meaning".

Procedures

Various procedures were used to gather information during the course of the study. These included document analysis, site visits, observations, surveys/questionnaires, and interviews. These procedures were selected, designed and carried out by the researcher in consultation with Pleasant Hill Community School administration and staff members. A concern for the ethical treatment of human subjects was exercised throughout the study.

A. Data Collection Methods

Document Analysis

Data pertaining to school population, student attendance, school programs, student services, staffing and other information related directly to school functioning were derived from documents and information supplied by the school administration and staff.

Data pertaining to the Pleasant Hill community, Community and Inner City School Policies and other information related to the study were obtained from a variety of sources. (See Appendix A.)

Observation

Observation by the researcher was used extensively to obtain information of both a general and specific nature. This included, but was not limited to, observation of physical facilities, special services areas, and regular instructional areas, to obtain a general picture of how the school functioned. In addition, the researcher observed a broad range of activities ranging from the breakfast and lunch meal service for hungry students to curricular and co-curricular instruction. Fifteen major observations were conducted in total.

Surveys/Questionnaires

Written response was obtained from both staff members and students. Although the survey instruments were not identical they provided an opportunity for all respondents to comment on their experiences/roles in the school as well as their perceptions regarding the magnitude, reasons for and effect of student movement. Staff members were also given an opportunity to highlight any trends noticeable in the school or school community. Seven staff members responded on a voluntary basis as did 25 Grade 7 and 8 students. (Appendix A provides copies of the survey instruments used.)

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 15 staff members, 6 parents and a number of students during the course of classroom, lunchroom and special activities observations. All interviews were either structured (parent) or semi-structured (staff and student) and recording was done by means of paper-and-pen as the interview

progressed. As in the case of the surveys used, the questions or prompts used in the interviews with various respondents were similar but not identical. This allowed for respondent-appropriate discussion while still providing for the accumulation of data on common topics. (See Appendix A for samples.)

One interview, conducted with the resident Elder, took a significantly different form. It was unstructured, and devoted primarily to clarification of the role of the Elder in the school and community. It also focussed upon family gravitation to and lifestyle within the Pleasant Hill area. Recording was done following the interview.

B. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Information from interviews, survey/questionnaire responses and observation data was collated on a topical basis, summarized and analyzed on the basis of numerical frequency. Data from documents and other stored information sources were subjected to content analysis and used, along with other information, to present a snapshot of the "lived experience" of staff, students, parents and others associated with Pleasant Hill. Selected verbatim survey and interview comments were used to illustrate the perceptions of specific respondents and to amplify and "humanize" the information presented.

Chapter 2

FINDINGS

The findings of this case study of Pleasant Hill Community School have been organized in a manner which will display the realities of the geographical, educational and social environment and the reactions, opinions and perceptions of those who are part of the school and the school community. Both perspectives are necessary in order to depict for the reader as much of the reality as possible.

A. Setting, Personnel and Programs

The Area

Pleasant Hill Community School is situated on the "West Side" of Saskatoon adjacent to the infamous 21st Street "stroll," which is frequented by adult and child prostitutes, and near St. Paul's Hospital. The area, once a solid enclave of blue collar and middle class home owners, is now inhabited by a largely transient population of families in need of inexpensive rental housing. The population is largely aboriginal, since the predominantly Ukrainian and Asian populations of the past have moved to other parts of the city.

The Pleasant Hill area of Saskatoon (as defined in the City of Saskatoon Planning and Building Department 1998 Neighbourhood Profiles) is characterized by the following:

- A population of approximately 5000 of which only 69% have English as a mother tongue and only 30% are employed.
- An elementary (K-8) school enrollment of 460 with 236 in Pleasant Hill and 224 in St. Mary, a Catholic elementary school.
- An average family income of under $22,000 per year, with 37% of all families receiving between $10,000 and $19,999 and 21% receiving less than $10,000 annually.

- An age distribution in which the majority of the population is under 35 years, and of which approximately 25% is under 4 years.
- Housing which is much more affordable than the Saskatoon average but poorly maintained.
- A neighbourhood which is made up of 76% rental housing and 55% multiple unit dwellings.

Pleasant Hill, with its high mobility, substandard housing and social problems receives considerable public scrutiny which, unfortunately, focuses on problems rather an on accomplishments. This results in a "ghettoization" of the area in the public perception and makes it a less than desirable destination for security-minded homeowners and businesspersons. There is, to this point, no significant rejuvenation in the area and housing is dominated by absentee owners.

The School

Pleasant Hill Community School is representative of the brick "castle" design common when it was built in 1928. It is an imposing two-storey structure with a well maintained and landscaped exterior located on a tree-lined street one block away from a heavy traffic area. The feeling one gets upon arriving is that of an impressive destination in the midst of rather mundane surroundings.

The interior of the school is also in keeping with its age with its wide hallways, open stairways and high ceilings. From an architectural perspective, the general impression is one of an older, well kept facility. From a human perspective, the impression is one of activity and caring. Signs and posters announcing events and facilities are in evidence. Bright colours break up the dark woodwork and samples of student work adorn hallways and classroom display areas. Signs and displays reflect the predominance of aboriginal students.

Space is used to good advantage and is, generally, appropriate for the use to which it is assigned. Hallways contain tables which are used for individualized instruction. This serves to create a homey and industrious atmosphere. The location of a Parents/Elders Room near the main entrance provides both easy access and a

welcoming climate for parents and community members who often come to consult with the Elder, visit and have coffee. The Office and Staff Room are readily accessible, clearly identified and in almost constant use by teachers, administrators, paraprofessional staff members, parent volunteers and many others.

While all areas of the school are well used, one serves particularly large numbers of students. The Nutrition Room, located in the basement, is well equipped and utilized. Each morning between 9:00 and 9:30 a.m. breakfast is served to students in need. While numbers vary from day to day, approximately 30 – 40 students are served each morning. These are for the most part, Kindergarten to Grade 4 aboriginal students. The room is also used to serve lunch between 12 noon and 12:30 p.m.. An average of 60 students (almost exclusively aboriginal in Kindergarten to Grade 4) receive lunch on a typical day. While older students can receive lunch in the gym and students who bring their own lunch eat in the Home Economics Room, the Nutrition Room provides the major evidence of the school's response to one of the most evident symptoms of poverty and social neglect – hungry children.

Another area in the school which serves large numbers of students in a variety of ways is the Library. It is bright and welcoming with a number of specialized features in addition to the shelves of books and other print materials. It contains a reading area, a number of tables for individual and group work, a computer room and a number of electronic keyboards which are used by members of the Piano Club. Activities conducted in the library are numerous and include meetings of the Book and Breakfast Club (every Friday morning), staff meetings, and a variety of other events for students and adults.

In spite of efforts to provide a bright environment, welcoming climate and multi-faceted program, Pleasant Hill is not without problems common in inner city schools. Tardiness, disciplinary problems, poor attendance and violent behaviour as well as hunger and neglect are identifiable by the policies and programs which have been put in place to combat them.

Recognition of these and associated problems in a number of elementary schools led to the introduction of the Provincial Community Schools Program in

the Saskatoon Public School Division in 1981 and the inclusion of Pleasant Hill in the program in 1986. In addition, the Division developed the Inner City Elementary Schools Program in 1990-91. This program, outlined in the Saskatoon Board of Education Concept Plan for Inner City Elementary Schools, was designed:

1. To increase the academic achievement of at risk students in the core curriculum.

2. To encourage appropriate student behaviours by creating an orderly and safe learning environment for at risk students in inner city schools.

3. To enhance each child's self esteem through an inviting and caring classroom and school environment.

4. To empower inner city communities and parents to meet the basic personal, social and cultural needs of at risk children.

Pleasant Hill was designated an Inner City School in 1991 since it met the required criteria for designation which are listed in Appendix B. In fact, it exceeded the minimum requirements for inclusion in many categories with its 43% of population not in the work force, 30.9% single parent families, 21.2% of homes where English is the second language, 30.3% of homes where the highest education level is less than Grade 9, 27.5% of families with income under $20,000, 66.5% of school population of Indian/Metis origin and 72% rental households. Since that time the school population of aboriginal descent has risen to 72% in 1991-92 and 87.6% in January 1999.

The Students

The students who attend Pleasant Hill are, largely, aboriginal and poor. Many come from single parent families (mother only), many live with family members other than parents (aunt or grandmother), many have lived in a variety of family situations and most have moved frequently. Collectively, they are aware of the existence and effects of poverty (such as substandard housing, lack of food and adequate clothing), alcohol and drug abuse, domestic turmoil and violence, prostitution, crime and other hazards of life in the inner city. They display a fear

and distrust of the police, social workers and employees of agencies and regulatory bodies with which they are in frequent contact. For a great many students Pleasant Hill, with its secure environment, warmth, nutrition program, clothing exchange and caring staff, represents a refuge in a tumultuous world. One staff member observed the day before a school holiday: *"Our biggest job today will be to get them out of the school because they dread holidays."*

Definition of the student population is difficult since it varies significantly from month-to-month due to high mobility and fluctuating attendance patterns. The following provides detail for the month of January 1999.

- 252 students were enrolled at the beginning of the month (221 aboriginal and 31 non aboriginal).
- 267 students were enrolled at the end of month (234 aboriginal and 33 non aboriginal).
- 31 enrollments took place (29 aboriginal and 2 non aboriginal).
- 16 withdrawals took place (16 aboriginal).
- 5 students were registered but not attending (5 aboriginal).
- 77.01 was the percentage of attendance (76.5% for aboriginal and 86.1% for non aboriginal).
- Of the 234 aboriginal students, 198 were Status, 18 were Non Status, 18 were Metis.
- Over 70 reserves were represented as the place of family ancestry.

While statistics vary from month to month, this gives a relatively accurate picture of the situation regarding student body, attendance and movement. It is, indeed, a complex and fluid student population as indicated by the fact that between September 1998 and April 1999, 419 students entered and left although the total population on April 30, 1999 was 272 students. (See Appendix C for additional data.)

The Staff

At the time this report was written there were 43.5 staff members at Pleasant Hill. This included 24 professional, 12 paraprofessional and three pre-kindergarten staff. There were also three lunch supervisors, a part-time school nurse and one full-time Elder. A total of 11 were aboriginal. In addition, there were a number of parent/community volunteers assisting in a variety of ways including classroom, library and special events activities. All adults demonstrated a concern for and empathy with students in spite of very evident frustration from dealing with seemingly insurmountable community and family problems. There was a noticeable team mentality.

Teaching assignments for professional staff displayed a concern for balance and role modelling since 7 of the total 14 classroom teachers were male (2 of these at the Grade 2 and 3 level). The availability of teacher associates, a resource room teacher, Cree language teacher, teacher librarian and counsellor provided for the delivery of a balanced program and provision for meeting individual needs of students. The assignment of a community coordinator to the school to facilitate a partnership between school and community was of particular significance.

The Services

A number of services, consistent with the philosophy behind the community school concept of meeting the unique needs of inner-city students, are an integral part of the school program. They include:

- A community pre-school for three and four year olds, run by a pre-school parent board and volunteers, which is free for community residents.
- A lunch program which provides a supervised lunch room for students who bring a bagged lunch.
- A free needs-based nutrition program, both breakfast and lunch, for students who have no food in their homes.

- A health services program including immunization, vision testing, hearing screening and health instruction which is delivered by the Public Health Nurse.
- A resident Elder program which provides a focus on traditional aboriginal values, teaches respect for all things and all people and provides an opportunity to participate in sharing circles and receive counselling on request.

Also integral to the operation of Pleasant Hill are the Community School Parent Council and the Community Association. The Parent Council meets monthly. It plans special events, expresses parent concerns, makes decisions regarding school and community and provides liaison between parents and school staff. The Community Association is focussed more on encouraging involvement in the community by both community members and school staff. It meets once every month and provides an opportunity (over coffee and snacks) for individuals to meet each other and feel that they are part of the community.

The Program

At Pleasant Hill the focus is on the "whole" child. Specific attention is devoted to the physical, social, mental and spiritual aspects throughout the entire program. Students are expected to conduct themselves in a courteous and respectful manner and to learn from mistakes which are recognized as being inevitable. Responsibility for learning from mistakes is placed upon the student although assistance is available from teachers, administrators, the counsellor or the Elder. Clear guidelines and consequences exist for dealing with disruptive behaviour and unacceptable language.

Since many students have limited problem solving skills and even fewer anger management and conflict resolution strategies, a concerted effort is made by the staff to teach and model such skills and strategies. The Second Step Program, which is designed to provide a process for anger management and personal problem solving, is commonly employed.

The Traditional Indian Code of Ethics serves as a major guideline for appropriate behaviour at Pleasant Hill. It teaches respect for the basic law of life and others, the need for truthfulness, moderation in all things, acceptance of and service to others and the importance of spiritual awareness and observance of religious practice. (See Appendix D for detail.)

The academic program at Pleasant Hill and the instructional approaches used are consistent with provincial Department of Education programs and school system practices. They are, however, modified in terms of content and approach to recognize and accommodate the needs of students and the unique cultural and social features of the school community. Concerted efforts are made to incorporate aboriginal content into all learning situations, and to use instructional materials which are appropriate in terms of both course objectives and learner experience. Contact with cultural realities is encouraged through the services of the resident Elder and aboriginal staff members as well as through clubs and activities such as the Awasis Dancers. Finally, efforts are made to provide opportunities and experiences which will equip students who come from impoverished homes to lead well-rounded lives and bring to their classrooms prerequisite learnings which other students bring as a matter of course.

Co-curricular activities are a valued and integral part of the program at Pleasant Hill. They play an invaluable role in encouraging growth of the whole child and complement the more formal curricular aspects of student learning. They include:

- Awasis Dancers
- Choir
- Drama Club
- Drumming and Singing
- Inner City Piano Program
- Basketball
- Floor Hockey
- Soccer
- Aboriginal Self Defence Class
- Aboriginal Crafts
- Adult Exercise Class
- Book and Breakfast Club
- Builders' Club
- Girls On The Move Club
- Kids' Cooking Club
- Red Cross Babysitting Course

- Softball
- Swimming
- Track
- Volleyball

Parental involvement in co-curricular and curricular activities is a positive feature of Pleasant Hill. This involvement may consist of parent assistance in the library, lunch room, clothing depot and individual classrooms. It may also take the form of parental assistance with our-of-school activities such as field trips and with clubs such as the Drama Club, the Book and Breakfast club and the Piano Club. In addition, a number of parents take part in school/community organizations such as the Parent Council and the Community Association. While the number of parents who volunteer in the school varies from day to day the average is probably five or six per day. Typically, there is no difficulty in obtaining help from parents when a request is made and an increasing number of parents have begun volunteering on a regular basis. Significantly, 116 individuals were recognized for their volunteer assistance at a Volunteer Appreciation Tea in 1998. While a number were corporate and public service personnel, many were parents.

B. Participant Perceptions, Opinions and Reactions

Because the purpose of this case study was to obtain an indication of the "lived experience" at Pleasant Hill, it was necessary to obtain information from a number of sources since the experiences of one individual or group might be significantly different from that of another. It was also necessary to elicit the type and complexity of response appropriate for various respondents. The following provides insight into the reality of the Pleasant Hill experience from various perspectives.

The Staff

Staff members were asked to respond to a number of questions. The following information was obtained from an analysis of both written responses voluntarily

supplied by seven staff members and verbal responses of many others. The same questions were asked in both cases and anonymity was guaranteed to all respondents. Significantly, the responses are representative of all staff – not just classroom teachers.

The following provides a summary of information received on a question-by-question basis:

1. **How would you describe teaching/working at Pleasant Hill?**

All respondents indicated that working at Pleasant Hill is a rewarding experience, although a number added such qualifiers as *"challenging"*, *"interesting"*, *"frustrating"* and *"stressful"*.

All indicated, explicitly or implicitly, that they felt that their efforts were *"making a difference"* and, as a result, were worthwhile. All respondents used their service to students as the measuring rod of success.

Staff cohesiveness and high morale were identified as a positive features of working at Pleasant Hill. Many respondents included positive comments about the in-building administration. Comments such as the following were made:

> *"Working at Pleasant Hill Community School has been and is a very rewarding experience for me. I don't think I have ever had a job that I've worked harder and had more stress than at this school and yet I look forward to coming to work each and every day. I guess it's because you never know what's going to happen next."*
>
> *"Challenging, because for some students the school provides a safe environment and that is their main reason for being there. It is challenging to interest these students in learning."*
>
> *"I find working at Pleasant Hill a very rewarding experience. Every day proves to be a challenge. Some days I go home feeling like I made a difference in a child's life. Other days I go home feeling tired of seeing poverty and the drastic effects that it has on the way a child functions."*
>
> *"INTERESTING...often frustrating, and most times very rewarding. I do believe that what I am doing here is making a difference; more so than in other schools I've*

taught in. There are a lot of positives about working in an inner-city school. I wouldn't trade the experience. There is a sense of community here that is rarely felt in other places."

"Great! kids are improving yearly and administration are second to none."

Several respondents indicated that they had grown professionally and that they looked inward for their rewards. Several also commented on community involvement and growth: *"While progress in this area is slow and difficult, change is taking place."*

2. **How serious is the phenomenon of student movement (enrollment and withdrawal) in your work and how do you cope with it?**

Student movement is a given and, while it poses challenges for staff (whether classroom or other), is accepted as such. One respondent indicated that from September to March, 320 students had enrolled and withdrawn, and that September and January are the months with the most student movement (especially September with the registration of Kindergarten students). Another respondent indicated that one half of the class changes from September to June. Another indicated that, while movement to and from reserves will likely continue, movement is less frequent than previously due to the shortage of affordable housing elsewhere in the city. Others indicated that non-attendance is a greater problem than enrollment and withdrawal while yet others indicated that attendance is improving.

One respondent provided the following commentary regarding the effects of student movement:

"It is a serious problem for the individual student involved. So often records indicate students have moved two, three or even more times in one year. So often with these records students are reported as being keen learners in the first year or so and then the problems start to creep in – behaviour, anger management, lack of progress, not motivated, poor attendance, lates, etc. Often the school records are incomplete because they have not been able to keep up with the moves made by the child. Often there are long spans of time when the student has not been in any

school. Sometimes Pleasant Hill is one of the schools that the student moves in and out of from an early age. Because these students repeatedly return to Pleasant Hill the teachers have an opportunity to develop some understanding of their capabilities and how to work with them. Many students who come to Pleasant Hill in the later grades have gone through many moves before we ever see them. They are often more challenging to get to know and to program for."

Methods of coping with a mobile school population varied significantly. Several respondents reported that they expect this and *"take it as it comes"* while others alter their approach by moving from a sequential approach to a more continuous, holistic one. Others report that they arrange learnings differently (in short time frames) to enable mobile students to cope. Yet others report that they teach the program and place the responsibility of catching up on the students.

The following comments are representative of staff coping strategies:

"At least half the class changes from September to June. I make any areas of study fairly short and "projectless" so that new students can find their place quickly – the quicker they are "on track" the better."

"There is student movement, but I continue teaching the program. I find that some students now know the system and will endeavour to catch up."

"When I first came here I made a conscious effort to change my teaching style. Up until coming to Pleasant Hill I had taught quite sequentially, with reviews at appropriate times during the year. Because attendance and movement is an issue for many of our students, they would miss too much with a sequential program. As a result I now teach with a shotgun/snowball approach. Skills are constantly taught, and review is constantly happening...the snowball builds as the year goes on, and everything is gathered into it. I think that this method, though different, is equally as effective as the one I've used in previous years."

"I teach the course as outlined, emphasize skills and count on my teacher assistant to work with the "comers" and weaker students."

Most staff members indicated that while movement continues to be a major problem the situation is getting better and that there is now a stable core of families living in the area and, as a result, the movement of students is not as great a problem as in past years. The problem of non-attendance, however, is a major concern for most respondents.

3. **In your opinion, what are the main reasons for student movement?**

All respondents indicated that student movement was due to family-related situations. These might be financial, cultural or crisis in nature. Movement to and from reserves was mentioned by the majority of respondents as a major phenomenon. Two suggested that the nomadic origins of first nations people could be a factor in causing frequent and repeated movement while most attributed this movement to either poverty or other family-related reasons.

Several respondents indicated that *"restlessness"* and *"avoidance of personal and economic problems"* was at the root of most of the family mobility.

One respondent provided this comprehensive assessment:

- *"Families leave the reserve because a parent is going to school in the city."*
- *"Families move as they try to find adequate and affordable housing."*
- *"Relatives follow families who have moved into the city."*
- *"Conditions (housing) on the reserves may make it challenging for a family to stay there."*
- *"For families on welfare who have no reason to stay in one place, moving becomes a way of life."*
- *"Shifting allegiances among the adults who care for students."*
- *"Family members often share the care of children and children may move from parent to grandparent, to aunt, etc."*

4. **What steps might be taken/are being taken to improve attendance and to prevent withdrawal?**

Action is presently being taken to improve attendance and is, in the view of respondents, generally effective. This action includes a number of things such as:

- Starting classes at 9:30 a.m.

- Providing breakfast, lunch and a clothing depot for those in need.

- Initiating an attendance award program. In the words of one respondent:
  "For the past three years we have had an attendance award program. There are three categories a) gold, b) silver and c) bronze. Gold is for students who have perfect attendance and no lates in a month. These students are recognized at an assembly. Silver is for students who have perfect attendance but also some lates and Bronze is for students who miss one day in the month. The names of all students who earned a certificate are printed in the school newsletter and are posted in the main hall of the school. This program seems to be successful in that all students regardless of grade are proud of the certificates."

- Phone calls to the home when children are absent and home visits when phones are not available in homes.

- Programs and activities which make students feel successful.

- Making the school an attractive place to be.

Several staff members shared the view stated by one respondent:

> *"I don't know what else we can do as a school to improve attendance short of driving to houses and picking kids up to bring them to school."*

Respondents agreed that preventing withdrawal could be accomplished by many of the same interventions as those aimed at encouraging good attendance. Other ways of preventing withdrawal which were mentioned included:

> *"Having a Community School Coordinator to establish liaison with families, providing for staff who 'fit in' and will stay at Pleasant Hill, establishing staff cohesiveness and high morale, encouraging parental input into decision-making."*

The importance of the principal and vice-principal, which was mentioned by several staff members as being a key, is indicated in the following:

> *"At a school level over the last three years staff continuity has had a very significant positive effect on the atmosphere and culture of the school. The administration has been very good at choosing staff members who 'fit in' and are effective in an inner-city situation. They also have been effective in bringing out the best in the staff, and developing a real camaraderie. The teachers and support staff at the school in general do a very good job of caring for their students, and taking responsibility in the school beyond their classes. In general, the staff accept that we are all responsible for all the kids..."*

5. **What trends (positive or negative) do you see developing at Pleasant Hill?**

All respondents indicated that positive trends are evident at Pleasant Hill. The most frequently mentioned positive indicator was the emergence of greater stability among families in the area. This stability has been and is being encouraged by:

> *"A core of stable families who are working to improve the neighbourhood."*
>
> *"Adult education programs (including GED) in the school."*
>
> *"The Elder Program, which has increased stability in families and established a welcoming atmosphere in the school."*
>
> *"Children who refuse to leave the school even when their families move."*
>
> *"The availability of free pre-school programs."*

As one respondent indicated:

> *"A lot of positive things are happening at Pleasant Hill Community School. Night classes such as GED classes are a benefit to these adult parents. Raising the self-esteem of the parents will lead to self-sufficiency. Offering more support staff for teachers allows for more individualized teaching."*

In the words of another staff member:

> *"There's been a big turn-around in the last three or four years – problems have been prevented by the elimination of recess and moving to one half hour at noon. The key change though has been getting more TA's to assist with the Numeracy/Literacy Program."*

Yet another respondent stated that:

> *"In the last few years I have seen a move to higher academic expectations on the part of staff and a higher level of achievement from students. The problem is that we may not see the results for a few years when the Grade 1's get to Grade 6 or 7."*

A number of respondents indicated that a move toward more stability on the part of staff members is a positive trend, since many long-term staff are visited and sought out by families for assistance and advice.

Increased student enrollment during the past years (e.g. 30 more this year than last) and a growing number of students who attend year after year, are trends identified by several respondents. The increase in both total numbers enrolled and "long-term attendees" is attributed to both community-related factors such as housing availability and school-related factors such as those mentioned previously.

In spite of the positive trends identified, all respondents acknowledged major problems in the area which impinge on the school. Such things as poverty, sub-standard housing and prostitution existent near the school were mentioned as on-going. One respondent indicated, too, an increase in the number of students with special needs (academic, behavioural, social, emotional) and the severity and variety of the problems presented by the group of students who are moving between schools. The situation is, perhaps, best characterized by the following observation:

> *"Right now I feel that the neighbourhood is at a crossroads and that with support positive changes will occur. I am also concerned that the support may be too little too late. I simply don't know."*

The Students

Students were also recognized as a major source of information about life at Pleasant Hill. While the questions asked of students were slightly different from those presented to staff members, the purpose was the same – to discover impressions of life at Pleasant Hill with particular emphasis on mobility. The following information was obtained in two ways – written response by 25 Grade 7 and 8 students and informal discussion with students of various grades in the course of site visits and, particularly, classroom observations. Anonymity was guaranteed in all cases and parental approval was obtained for written responses.

1. **What is it like going to Pleasant Hill?**

All students responded positively although several qualified their responses with terms such as *"fun and interesting"*, *"good but boring"*, and *"quiet"*. A very few included descriptors such as *"kids are mean"* although they also said they felt the school was *"alright"* overall.

Specific comments about the school included the following:

"It is different-kind of quiet and nice."

"Pleasant Hill is an O.K. School!"

"I like it but the kids here are noisy and mean."

"I think it's very fun and I look forward to going to school."

"It is better than my old schools."

"It's a pretty good school to go to because everything here is easy."

"It is like walking in a gang school because a lot of people get along and so few who don't."

"It's OK. The school's pretty cool and the teacher's are pretty cool too. I think it's one of the best schools I've attended."

2. **List as many of the schools you have attended as you can.**

3. **Where did you go to school just before you came to Pleasant Hill?**

Responses varied widely from a high of eight schools attended (one student) to a low of one attended (one student). Although the information obtained was useful in determining that most students had attended several schools, it was incomplete since many students indicated that they couldn't remember all the schools attended. A number of students indicated that they had moved every year. Only one student indicated that Pleasant Hill was the only school attended. The majority of students, however, stated that they had attended four schools before coming to Pleasant Hill.

The list of schools attended just before coming to Pleasant Hill was more revealing. Eleven indicated that they had attended other schools in Saskatoon - the majority in inner city areas. At least five had attended out-of-province schools. Several attended either band or boarding school.

Schools listed as those attended last year included:

- Montrose (AB) – 1
- Douglas Park (BC) – 1
- King George (MB) – 1
- Caswell (SK) – 1
- Confederation Park (SK) – 1
- Forest Grove (SK) – 1
- Little Red Reserve (SK) – 1
- Mayfair (SK) – 1
- McDougal (SK) – 1
- Princess Alexandra (SK) - 1
- Queen Mary (SK) – 1
- Sturgeon Lake (SK) - 1
- W. P. Bate (SK) – 1
- Westmount (SK) - 3
- Boarding School (?) – 1
- Brownview (?) – 1
- Kaykishaway Reserve (?) – 1
- New Era (?) – 1
- Park Meadows (?) –1

Note: This list of 19 schools was compiled from written responses by 25 Grade 7 and 8 students only. In spite of the lack of detail about location, it does indicate a high degree of mobility in one year as well as a broad pattern of movement.

4. **Why did you come to Pleasant Hill?**

These and similar responses confirmed that housing availability in the area determined the choice of school more than any other factor:

"It's close to my house, not a Catholic school."

"My family moved into this area and friends come here."

"Cause it was close to my apartment."

"It was the closest school to my dad's house."

"Because I live by it."

Although the majority of respondents indicated that they went to Pleasant Hill because it was closest to their homes, other reasons included the following:

"Family reasons."

"Friends here."

"More to do."

"Had to."

"Transferred here."

5. **Do you think you might be leaving? Why?**

Predictably, many students were unsure about whether they might be leaving or not. This uncertainty was confirmed in the answers given by those who chose to respond. More than half indicated that they either *"didn't know"* or *"didn't think they were leaving"* before the end of the year. Those who believed they were likely to leave gave the following reasons:

"Want to switch."

"Want to be with my friends."

"Going to the reserve."

"City is too violent."

6. **What do you like best about going to school here?**

7. **What don't you like about going to school here?**

Classes available (especially Industrial Arts, Home Economics and Physical Education) and the presence of friends accounted for the majority of positive responses and were equally represented. School activities/clubs, teachers, and shorter school days were also listed as important positive features. Most respondents indicated that there was nothing they didn't like about the school.

A number of students indicated that "other students" were a reason for their dislike of Pleasant Hill although several indicated that these people often did not attend the school but were simply *"hanging around"*. Comments included:

"Get pushed around too much."

"Some of the kids."

"The bad kids around here."

"The people that hang around here and I don't like them."

Other reasons for not liking to attend Pleasant Hill included distance from home, teachers, no recess and a short lunch hour.

In summary, it appears that school programs (both curricular and co-curricular) and friendships comprise the most significant positive features for students, although many express concern about other students. One respondent stated that in Pleasant Hill he likes *"gym, computers, guitar and friends"*. That is representative of the response from many students.

8. **Would you like to go to a different school? Why? Why not?**

When faced with the question of attending a different school most students (about 75%) indicated that they preferred to stay at Pleasant Hill. Their reasons varied:

> *"No!!! Because I know everybody and all my friends are here."*
>
> *"No because the others are not close."*
>
> *"It is fun and interesting."*
>
> *"To tell you the truth there's nothing really wrong about this school."*

Only a small proportion of students indicated a preference for change of school based on availability of friends elsewhere, nature of Pleasant Hill friends and community and a desire for change. Several had mixed feelings. Comments included the following:

> *"Yes! Cause I've been here too long! Or I don't know."*
>
> *"No because I like the teachers and yes because I have to make new friends, the ones I hang with are too bad."*
>
> *"Yes and no because I have friends and no I hate the community."*

For the majority of students attending Pleasant Hill, the experience is a positive one. The courses, teachers, activities and friendship patterns appear positive in the respondents' view although many are mobile and are attending the school for family reasons such as proximity to affordable housing. The only stated reasons for concern relate to the nature of the community and other students in the school or area.

The Parents

Parents, particularly those in frequent contact with the school and its activities, were also given an opportunity to comment on the Pleasant Hill experience. A total of six

parents were interviewed in an attempt to obtain yet another point of view on school functioning. Several parents interviewed held positions on the Parent Council or worked as school volunteers. All were chosen for their potential for contribution rather than for their representativeness as typical area parents. Questions asked were, as in the case of other respondent groups, directed toward obtaining perceptions of school functioning with particular emphasis upon student mobility. They were also invited to comment on emerging trends in the school and school community. Interviews were face-to-face with the exception of one which was conducted by telephone. Parents interviewed had one or two students attending the school, on average.

1. **How long has your son/daughter attended Pleasant Hill?**

   Students had in all cases been attending Pleasant Hill for several years with several having attended for seven or eight years. The parents interviewed were knowledgeable, although not representative of the many highly mobile families in the area.

2. **Where did he/she go to school before?**

   Most students represented had attended only Pleasant Hill.

3. **What is it like for him/her going to Pleasant Hill?**

   Parents indicated that they were pleased with the overall school experience for their children, particularly the caring climate and dedication of teachers and administrators. They also indicated that friendships had been formed by their children and that the school was *"like home"* for both them and their children. A recent emphasis on basic skills, (particularly through the teaching of phonics) and the introduction of a numeracy/literacy program (with provision for five additional teacher assistants) were highlighted as positive for children. One respondent commented: *"Its time they started teaching phonics – that numeracy/literacy program is great"*.

   Concern was expressed, however, about the degree of violence in the Pleasant Hill area and its effect on young children. One respondent said that going to and

from school could be *"risky"*. Another stated that bullying had been a problem (especially when her child was in Grades 3, 4 and 5) but that things have improved significantly in the last few years. Several parents indicated as well, that *"racism (against whites) has become big in the past two years and it never was before."* A number of respondents were also concerned that, in spite of efforts being made within the school, the quality of the program is not adequate to ensure entry of Pleasant Hill graduates into "regular" collegiate programs.

4. **Why did you send him/her to Pleasant Hill?**

All parents indicated that they had sent their children to Pleasant Hill because they lived in the area. One said that she would continue to send her children to Pleasant Hill in the future in order to ensure stability in their lives and in recognition of the fact that the area, although less than ideal, contained affordable housing. Other parents indicated that they were either long-term renters or property owners and would continue to send their children to the school due to proximity. One parent reported that each year she and her child discussed where the child should attend school. They decided, repeatedly, that Pleasant Hill provided the best option.

5. **Are you thinking of moving him/her to another school?**

When asked whether they were thinking of moving their children to another school several respondents replied that they were, although for some that seemed unlikely to happen:

> *"I definitely want to move my kids to another school to avoid the Pleasant Hill label that means they get put into modified programs in high school."*

> *"Would like to move to an area without social problems and a better school – but we are like our kids, afraid to move to new things."*

6. **What is best about Pleasant Hill?**

All respondents indicated, directly or indirectly, that the caring staff, the warm environment and the family atmosphere which characterize Pleasant Hill represent its major strengths. Some identified the stability provided by long-term staff and programs as a positive feature. Others said that the employment of a Community Coordinator, the provision of a nutrition program, the practice of conducting home visits and the recent addition of five teacher assistants to support the Numeracy/Literacy program were the most positive of all features. One respondent indicated that the elimination of recess breaks and the shortening of the noon hour were very effective in *"reducing fights and skipping out."*

7. **What is not good about Pleasant Hill?**

The fact that deficiencies exist in spite of staffing and program initiatives was clearly stated. Poor attendance, frequent mobility and low academic performance were directly or indirectly attributed to the general poverty and social problems associated with the Pleasant Hill area. The need for greater emphasis on academics, more social time for students and more parental involvement were mentioned by several parents. Two major concerns were stated as follows:

> *"There is so little social time here for kids – no recess and only one half hour at lunch. These policies were established because kids were fighting, skipping out and coming back late – but it doesn't give them enough time to socialize now."*

> *"We need more emphasis on academics here so that our kids can get into regular programs in high school."*

8. **How is his/her attendance?**

All parents indicated that they were satisfied with the attendance patterns of their children and the general policies/rewards for good attendance fostered by the school. They also emphasized that they considered good attendance on the part of their children a parental responsibility.

One parent stated explicitly that this applies to aboriginal as well as non-aboriginal families: *"It is not a cultural right of kids to decide whether to go to school or not – that's bad parenting."*

9. How is his/her academic and other progress?

Generally, parents indicated that the academic progress of their children was satisfactory although some felt that the programs offered and the standards of performance were not sufficiently demanding and would likely result in Pleasant Hill graduates being placed in modified courses in high school. Others indicated strong support for ongoing efforts at individualizing instruction and emphasizing basic reading and mathematical skills.

10. What trends/changes do you see taking place at Pleasant Hill?

Positive trends were identified by all respondents. These included:

- A noticeable change to more stability since a number of students are staying in the school for three or four years and a few are staying for seven or eight years.
- An increase in the number of teachers staying in the school for several years.
- Ever increasing effort by teachers, and the staff in general, to improve the program and meet student needs. As one respondent said: *"The school just gets better every year."*

In spite of these positive trends, however, all respondents indicated a continuing concern about the nature of the Pleasant Hill area with its absentee landlords, substandard housing, poverty, violence and crime. In particular, all indicated the need to alleviate the problems associated with the "stroll," including health risks such as used needles on the playground and victimization of young people by pimps and "Johns".

One respondent commented on general trends evident in the Pleasant Hill community. Trends identified included the following:

- A continuing shift toward aboriginal population and the virtual elimination of the formerly large Asian population.

- An increase in home ownership by residents as a result of QUINT (a multiple agency housing purchase initiative).

- A continuing supply of affordable but substandard housing.

- Community initiatives including clean-up of the "stroll", advocacy for improved housing, volunteer park patrols and other work with the Saskatoon Police Service to improve safety in the area.

Chapter 3

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this case study was to identify and display the reality faced daily in a "typical" inner city school. No effort was made to evaluate policies, practices and activities. Instead, effort was devoted to displaying the "lived experience" based on information from a variety of print and personal sources.

Summary

Pleasant Hill is an old school which as been updated and maintained in a manner which allows it to provide an appropriate learning environment for approximately 260 Kindergarten to Grade 8 students. It's designation as both a Community School and an Inner City School means that it enjoys a staffing component in excess of that to be found in "regular" elementary schools as well as program services and adaptations which bring it into close contact and partnership with it's school community.

Students and staff reflect the reality of the school's location in the inner city with its poverty and social problems. The majority of the students are aboriginal, poor and highly mobile due to family-related circumstances, crises and inclinations. Their attendance and achievement levels are low in comparison with "average" students. Many are hungry. The staff (of which approximately 25% are aboriginal) demonstrate, through personal contact with students as well as through program innovation, a concern for and empathy with students. This caring attitude is fostered by the provision of additional staff and program supports by the school division. Innovation is not a choice at Pleasant Hill - it is a way of life.

The program is designed to meet the needs of students – physically, emotionally and intellectually. Services such as a free breakfast and lunch program, clothing depot and health screening services are a response to the realities of life for many students. A resident Elder and part-time counsellor provide emotional support as do a variety of clubs and activities. Anger management, conflict resolution and problem solving receive overt attention. Curricular programs consist of those prescribed by the Department of Education and taught with appropriate adaptation. Co-curricular programs are numerous

and varied. The Traditional Indian Code of Ethics is used as a guide for appropriate behaviour and personal responsibility is emphasized in all facets of school life.

Staff members, students and parents indicated that Pleasant Hill is a good place to be. Students and parents indicated that the school climate is supportive, caring and welcoming. Staff members described working there as positive although many added qualifiers like rewarding, challenging and exhausting. The negatives associated with Pleasant Hill are the result of poverty and the less-than-desirable features of the area.

High mobility and poor attendance were major concerns for staff members and parents. Many students indicated that they can not remember all the schools they have attended. While many attempts at improving attendance and preventing withdrawal were mentioned by staff members, a number indicated that it is necessary to learn to cope with these problems since they are the result of family decisions or crises – most often the search for affordable housing or the avoidance of personal problems - and are not easily solved.

Both staff members and parents indicated a concern about the academic program. While teachers expressed concern about instruction and student achievement, parents commented on program quality and standards which, several felt, were not sufficiently high to guarantee Pleasant Hill graduates entrance into regular programs in high school.

All those consulted in the study indicated that a number of positive trends are evident in the school and the area. An increase in the number of stable families in the area, the close contact between the school and the community, the success of a numeracy/literacy program in the school and community development initiatives aimed at improving housing options and safety for residents were the most frequently identified of these positive trends.

Documents/Sources

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Saskatchewan Educational Leadership Unit

Pleasant Hill Case Study
January – May 1999

Parent Interview

The Saskatchewan Educational Leadership Unit, located at the University of Saskatchewan, is conducting a study of school attendance in Saskatchewan. A case study of Pleasant Hill School is part of that larger study. The Director of Education and the Principal have given permission for Pleasant Hill to be included in the study. Information is being obtained from school staff members, parents, students and school records.

This interview is designed to give you the opportunity to comment on your perceptions about the school, your reasons for placing your child in the school, and reasons for which you might be withdrawing him/her from the school.

Anonymity is guaranteed since this interview is not being recorded and identities of respondents are not revealed in reports or summaries of results.

1. How long has your son/daughter attended Pleasant Hill?

2. Where did he/she go to school before?

3. What is it like for them going to Pleasant Hill?

4. Why did you send him/her to Pleasant Hill?

5. Are you thinking of moving him/her to another school?

6. What is best about Pleasant Hill?

7. What is not good about Pleasant Hill?

8. How is his/her attendance?

9. How is his/her academic and other progress?

10. What trends/changes do you see taking place at Pleasant Hill?

Monitoring School Attendance in Saskatchewan Schools
Case Study of Inner City School
Pleasant Hill School – Saskatoon
January – May 1999

I. General

The high mobility of families, especially those living in the inner city, means that children frequently register in several schools during the school year. School administrators and teachers are expressing concern about the number of "street kids". Little or no information is available in Saskatchewan which indicates the extent to which students make the transition between/among schools and grades, or simply "fall through the cracks".

An inner city school was selected for intensive case study as a means of obtaining the "lived experience" as a part of the larger *Monitoring School Attendance in Saskatchewan Schools* study which was designed to provide generalizable data regarding student movement within the provincial educational system.

Pleasant Hill School in Saskatoon was selected since it is a "typical" inner city elementary school which is available for and open to activities associated with a case study. Its location in Saskatoon was also important as a means of minimizing costs.

II. Planning and Approach

The basis for activity is the case study methodology suggested by Merriam (1988). This approach emphasizes collaborative, evolutionary, multi-faceted investigative activity. Emphasis will be placed upon qualitative/descriptive assessment rather than quantitative analysis. The focus throughout, will be the total school/school population.

III. Model/Procedure

While specific activity will be evolutionary and collaborative (as per Merriam) a number of major activities/processes can be identified in advance.

A. Information Sources

Sources of information will include past and present individuals and groups associated with Pleasant Hill. Information will be obtained through reference to stored data as well as participant response and researcher observation.

B. Activity

The following sources/procedures will be employed in obtaining information for use in this study:

1. Documents/Stored Information

Information will include, but not be limited to:

- "Monitoring School Attendance in Saskatchewan Schools" study.
- Saskatoon Board of Education "Evaluation of Inner City School Concept Plan Implementation".
- Pleasant Hill School student attendance data.
- City of Saskatoon Planning Department Reports.
- Other information to be determined.

2. Response/Interviews

Written response from staff, administrators and others will be obtained to provide information regarding the effect of mobility on specific functions/operations.

Interviews with parents, students, elders and members of school organizations will also be employed to obtain "layers of meaning and impression."

3. Observations

Observations by the researcher will include, but not be limited to, observation of regular activities (classroom, resource room, lunch room, playground, etc.), special events (clubs, special activities, etc.) and neighbourhood locations (stores, recreational facilities, etc.).

A concern for the ethical treatment of human subjects will be displayed throughout investigation and reporting.

IV. Product/Report

The report will be a narrative/descriptive account which will provide detail but limited rationale and justification. Validation will be accomplished through contact with contributors/subjects and overall research findings.

The report will be written in a manner appropriate for use by the Department of Education but not, necessarily, the general public.

V. Timelines/Progress

The following timelines are tentative since this case study is part of a larger research project. Tentative timelines are as follows:

Planning/Initiating – January and February 1999

Information Acquisition – March to May 1999

Information Analysis – May 1999

Report Preparation – May 1999

Report Submission – May 31, 1999.

March 15, 1999